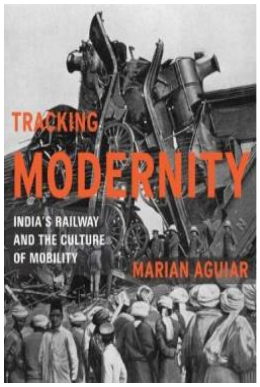
1. Essential Reading




# Tracking Modernity. India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility - by Marian Aguiar

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)
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*Tracking Modernity* examines different forms of representing modernity in India by focusing on the way the railway was imagined by colonial, nationalist and postcolonial writers and visual artists.

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## Modernity, mobility and the railway

Mobility is central to how modernity has been lived and imagined. Social and political transformations taking place in the 19 th and 20 th centuries were envisioned as a break, a move, from a static past into a possible future. Narratives of progress and expansion were used to describe the advent of institutional forms such as urbanization and industrial production and new ways of living such as individualism and secularisation. Promises of equality, freedom and emancipation were linked to the possibility to move, socially and physically. It is not surprising then that, in a culture that rendered mobility so central, technologies of movement such as the steamship, the car or the airplane gained huge symbolic significance. In 19 th century Britain it was arguably the railway that best symbolized visions of social and political reform and changes in the lived experience of space and time. These visions were themselves mobilized in an age of expanding empires: as the British brought the railway to their colonies, along with it came notions of modernity whose meaning derived from the institutions and practices of Victorian England. In the journey, some of these ideas of modernity imported by colonial powers would flourish while others would be altered ushering in what social scientists have termed ‘alternative modernities’.

### Aim and structure of the book

*Tracking Modernity* , by Marian Aguiar, charts the symbolic history of the railway in India since the opening of the first line in 1853 under colonial rule. By examining how writers and visual artists have imagined the Indian railway, Aguiar seeks to illuminate the divergent and contested ways in which modernity came to be constituted within the Indian context. She analyses this process in terms of colonial, national and global modernities. The first chapter of the book examines the colonial discourse of the railway while the rest of the text describes how such narrative was, and continues to be, contested by the very culture of mobility that the train represents.

## Colonial discourse

Colonial writers, Aguiar argues, envisioned the train as a means by which to enact change, an embodiment of progressive history. This technology would carry India into modernity through providing an infrastructure that would further governance and the economy. This process of transformation would take place not only at the level of the state however, but also on the micro-level of the railway space. Aguiar describes how the public space of the railway was conceived as a site of social reform where Indians would both literally and symbolically encounter the colonial order. Against the social inmobilism represented by religion and especially Hinduism and its caste structures, the public space of the railway represented a secular space where cultural and religious differences could be overcome under one civic order. Through access to the railway, colonial writers argued, Indians would become emancipated.

The everyday reality of the Indian railway, however, rarely matched this ideal of a secular space that would open social boundaries and create modern subjects. Aguiar illustrates how colonial writings depicted Indians as excessively noisy and verbal (as opposed to the more contemplative British) and abusive of the secular space of the train by performing religious rituals and domestic tasks such as cooking and washing clothes. In these writings the train space becomes ‘private as well as public, religious as well as secular, corporeal as well as mechanical, and Indian as well as European’ (p. 179). This contrast between the ideal and the reality, Aguiar argues, served to further justify the colonial project by reinforcing the notion of Indians as different and in need of emancipation through reason, science and technology.

## Nationalist representations

By contrast, such narratives of emancipation were challenged by nationalist intellectuals who called into question the rhetoric of progress as universal. In their writings they targeted the train in particular as the material symbol of imperialism and, by reinventing the vocabulary and the imagery of the railway, shifted the terms by which the technology should be judged. They denounced the suffering caused by a railway built largely by hand, the loss of sustainable industries wrought by the introduction of cheaper products from overseas, and the devastating famines caused partly by the expansion of commercial agriculture that the railway had made possible. Rather than a sign of progress, nationalist writers envisioned the train as a tool of domination and exploitation that had to be judged in terms of its impact on human lives. Some of these nationalist writers embraced the rhetoric of technological development but criticized the particular use that the British were making of it to dominate India’s economy and society. They saw the train as being ‘misused rather than misconceived’ (p.66). Others, led by figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi, viewed the train as a harbinger of morally corrupt, culturally alien ways of being. Despite their differences, the writings of both

groups of intellectuals offered a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial rhetoric of the railway as a means of progress.

## Partition and the Death Train

The ideal of the train as a modern secular space and its image as a vector of progress were challenged again in a dramatic form by the sectarian violence that erupted at the time of India's independence in 1947. Following the partition of the subcontinent, trains taking Muslim refugees into the newly formed Pakistan and Hindu refugees into India were attacked and the passengers tortured, raped and killed. Trains departing in their capacity as secular spaces under the protection of the state would arrive at their destination as silent machines filled with dead bodies. India, as a political and social space, had been enabled by the development of the railway. But its birth as a nation occurred also through the violence of displacement, an event symbolized by the image of the 'death train' which has become part of the collective imagination in a way that parallels the representation of the train in post-Holocaust Europe.

## The post-colonial railway

Despite the traumatic events of the Partition, the Indian railway has continued to symbolize progress in a way that testifies to the enduring power of colonial representations. Nehru, the president of the newly formed nation, took the railway as intrinsic to his vision of an integrated India. He described it as 'India's greatest national asset' and a tool to overcome economic inequalities within the nation. In the decades following independence, writers and visual artists have used the image of the train as a way to explore emerging national identities, especially around relationships between the rural and the urban fashioned in the context of post-independent development agendas. In the work of these postcolonial intellectuals the train appears as simultaneously transformative of the nation and the self but in ways that are both liberating and troubling for the new national subject. The promise of mobility and individuality may be enticing but also remains a source of anxiety within a country still largely characterised by traditional social structures.

## Globalization, terrorism and the India railway

Aguiar culminates her journey through the symbolic history of the Indian railway by focusing on the recent terrorist attacks on trains, especially those in Mumbai in 2006 and 2008. While these events offer multiple readings on different spatial scales, the terrorists' targeting of first-class coaches used by the transnational elites of a city which is becoming a key site of globalization evinces the new context in which the train as a symbol of modernity is being mobilized. It expresses once more the way that a commitment to mobility, so intrinsic to modernity, also poses some of its most intractable contradictions. This global inflection in the symbolic history of the railway in India and elsewhere is set to become ever more prominent as inequalities worldwide grow and mobility becomes a site of privilege, an expression of elite identity, and a site of contestation.

## Contribution to the mobilities literature

Through a focus on 'social imaginaries', *Tracking Modernity* makes a valuable contribution to the mobilities literature by linking discussions of mobility with debates on alternative modernities, an issue that remains insufficiently developed. The book includes a

filmography that will be valued by those interested in viewing the movies analyzed, films that themselves highlight the relationship between visual culture and mobility. It is disappointing though that a book with a large potential readership has been written in a style that is appropriate for a cultural studies departmental seminar but which otherwise appears unnecessarily obscure. This is, however, a minor objection to what overall is a significant book. At a time when all eyes are focused on the increasing global influence of the East, *Tracking Modernity* furthers our understanding of mobility cultures outside the rich North and more specifically in a region whose future will no doubt exert tremendous influence on global mobility systems.

# About the author

Marian Aguiar is Associate Professor in Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University (USA). Her research focuses on culture, modernity and globalization, especially in relation to South Asia and the South Asian diaspora.

## Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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**Associated Thematics :**

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Inequalities
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Policies

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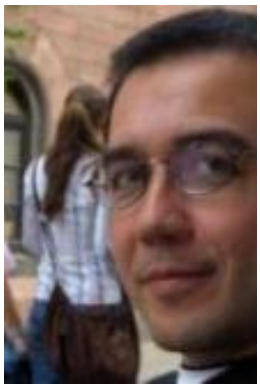

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Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In adittion, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was  based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

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